

## CITYSTYLE

PHOTOS BY DON ROBINSON



## Rhodie people and their blooms

*Rhododendron growers are a dedicated lot. The bloom is past now, but the devotees carry on*

by Heather Laskey

I have about 700 dwarfs in my garden... We had a big bump down to minus eight and the evergreens collapsed... My yaks are all established now... Who's that man in Ohio who grows pygmies?... I came to rhododendrons from hollies...

"Excuse me," I said to the nearest person in the group I was eavesdropping on at a Rhododendron Society of Canada meeting, "But I need some help. I only have five flowers on my Satan."

"Blooms. Did you mulch?"

"Of course," I replied defensively.

"What with?"

"Old leaves."

"What leaves?"

"Maple."

"Tsk tsk. No good. Only oak."

"Well I don't know that I'd agree with that," frowned a woman. And they were off again. Soon they got into manure — what kind and whether it was necessary or not. They got heated over it.

The genus of plants known as rhododendrons, which also includes azaleas (of which my Satan is one), inspires in some a devotion barely guessed at by the mere plant-it-and-water-it gardener. And these devotees do not necessarily have gardens as we

usually think of them — that is, cleared cultivated spaces with lawns and formal flower-beds. Growers of rhodos, or rhodies (as the initiated may call them) are more likely to cultivate their beloved shrubs in open, tidied-up woodland in a quasi-natural habitat.

We ordinary souls can only gawk with wonder at the product. My own favorite place for a sneak-peep of an uplifting rhododenron and azalea scene is along Halls Road, bordering Williams Lake outside the city. A group of people have been growing them there among the trees since they moved in as young couples in the early '50s and built their homes.

Although the Halls and the Nicholsons were the first two families





Rhodie people: (l to r) Robinson, Barbara Hall, Tom and Yvette Baskett, Nicholson

to arrive, the rhododendron story started when Dick Steele, a captain in the Navy, bought a lot and transplanted the rhododendrons and azaleas he had been breeding in Cornwallis onto his and the other families' properties.

Barbara Hall recalls how "Dick just came out and planted them here for us to begin with. Before that I hardly knew what a rhododendron was." Commander Tony Law and his wife Janet bought their lot because of his friendship in the Navy with Captain Steele. "Dick was experimenting for hardy plants and he came out and popped the plants in here and there," says Tony, "and thanks to his great effort we now have the most gorgeous area."

Both the Laws are artists — her professional name is Jane Shaw. They met at school before the war and since his retirement from the service he has returned to his first profession. "Jane paints the flowers. I paint the landscapes." The men in the other three rhodo families, Ken Hall, Fraser Nicholson and Robbie Robinson, were all doctors.

The lots are not fenced off, so the landscape is visually continuous, the houses unobtrusive among the trees which are dominated by pines, providing an ideal growing environment. Pines root deeply thus they do not compete with the shallow-rooting rhododendrons. Their needles provide an excellent mulch, and their canopy

lets through adequate light while providing shade and protection. Here and there, hidden among the trees and shrubs with the lake glittering behind are decorative Japanese lanterns which Tony Law made in cement from a cast and gave to his neighbors.

In June, when blooming is at its peak, the Halls Road growers invite other members of the Rhododendron Society of Canada to take a walk around the place. The colors are glorious. In the rhododendrons alone, as Jane Law says, "There is everything from pure white to fragile yellows, pinks, purples, vivid deep reds, violets."

The regional branch of the society was started by Steele and George Swaine, the eminent horticulturalist at the famous rhododendron gardens at the Kentville Research Station. The two have both evangelized for the rhododendron genus and developed hybrids (crosses between different varieties) that are not only beautiful but hardy and suitable for different locations.

Swaine started a commercial nursery at Blomidon and Steele and his daughter Diane Hatherley have the Bayport Plant Farm near Rose Bay outside Lunenburg. He left Halls Road to live nearer the farm, but the new owners of his Halls Road house — another medical family, the Basketts — are also into rhododendrons.

What Steele and Swaine started

others have continued. John Weagle hybridises on his city lot on Edward Street and his plants have spread into his neighbors' gardens: he is the man with the 700 "dwarfs". Most members of the rhododendron family like shaded, protective environments, but Walter Ostrum has developed one of the most impressive rhododendron gardens in the region in the most unlikely location: it's on the windswept granite near Peggy's Cove. He has done this by using carefully chosen, low-growing varieties and hybrids he has produced himself, rooted in pockets of prepared soil.

Rhodie people recommend that new converts buy plants from specialist growers to get the benefit of tried varieties and for sound advice. Otherwise there is Agriculture Canada's illustrated leaflet *Rhododendrons in the Atlantic Provinces* which gives all the basic information on where and how to plant and tend, and suggests suitable varieties.

A great attraction of these shrubs, as rhodie people tell you, is that once they are established in a good situation, and if they are properly mulched — unlike my poor Satan — they then look after themselves: rhododendrons can live to 150 years and azaleas over 40. A perk in this province is that the soil is mostly acid — that is, lime-free. Rhododendrons don't like lime.

Steele recommends planting in a shallow but wide hole with plenty of peat moss mixed in, and a two- to four-inch deep mulch of wood chips, bark, pine needles or old oak leaves, hand-weeding to disturb the roots as little as possible. Their disadvantage is their price, and this increases according to size. They can be grown from seed and cuttings, but it takes several years to get a decent-sized plant. The society sells seeds to members and anyone interested in joining may contact it via the Nova Scotia Museum.

It has been years since Dick Steele went to Halls Road and "popped the plants in here and there." The young couples are now grey haired, their children have grown and gone, but, barring disaster, the rhodos will be in their prime for years to come.

Meanwhile Dick Steele who started it all is still trying to breed a new shade of azalea. "The muted yellow appeals to me more than the clear yellow," he laments, "and all I ever get is that damn clear yellow! The Lord is punishing me!"

"Excuse me" I tried again at the rhodie-growers meeting, "but inchworms are munching on my Gibraltar" (that's my other adored azalea). "What should I do?" "Pick 'em off!" "Spray!" "Too late!" "Rubbish!" . . . Then they got too technical so I looked at and smelt some of their prize flowers instead. Sorry, blooms. ☺



# Halifax's "buskers" and their sunny music

*On a sunny day you might find a flutist, a fiddler, a few guitarists or even a full-fledged hillbilly band playing for coins on the streets of Halifax. It's an old practice from England and it adds a dab of vitality to downtown*

by Margaret Macpherson

**T**he portable Sony Walkman may have its place on rainy days when music has the power to dispel gloom, but on sunny afternoons midtown Halifax has music all its own.

Among the hand bells of peddle-carts, the whistling of workmen and the city's general din, add the rhythm and harmony of street musicians. On one recent Saturday a 40-minute count between Spring Garden Road and Historic Properties disclosed a flutist, a fiddler, a handful of individual guitarists and a full-fledged, four-piece hillbilly band complete with washboard, banjo and gut bucket bass.

There's a special name for these musicians: buskers. As in Victorian and Edwardian England, busking — itinerant entertainment accompanied by the clinking of coppers in a hat or opened guitar case laid out on the street, has come back into fashion and has added a unique dimension, a foot-tapping flavor, to downtown Halifax streets.

The idea of busking is often a romantic one. Who would not like to idle away an afternoon watching sloops and sails glide across the harbor while strumming a much loved guitar?

The buskers themselves, however, take a more realistic view of their trade. "It's a hand-to-mouth existence," says solo guitarist Steve Lee, found sunburnt and singing down by the waterfront. He indicated an almost empty guitar case containing a crumpled dollar bill and a smattering of loose silver. "Today this money is just to buy some beer so my girlfriend and I can go to a party tonight but sometimes it represents grocery money or paying the rent." With a few quick riffs on the guitar and an easy smile he adds, "I can't knock it though, this sun is just wonderful."

Lee is a Cape Bretoner. He writes fiction, takes on a few students for private music lessons and does odd carpentry jobs for people who are renovating their homes. None of this is steady work, so Lee supplements his income by taking his guitar to the streets and playing, for the most part, original songs. More often than not people merely pass by but occasionally they'll stop to listen. "When you're playing on the streets you have to push to give forth an air of projection," he says. "If you centre yourself on your music it becomes a good training ground even if people don't bother to stop."

Mark Clifford is another guitarist. He can be found playing outside the Halifax library. He works part-time in a small recording studio that "isn't quite on its feet yet" while his wife, Beth, a violinist, is on call for a retail clothing store. For the past five years the couple have been busking on city streets throughout Canada. Mark speaks of the financial side of street music — a good afternoon outside the library can net up to \$30 — but, again, the emphasis is more on music than on money.

"I can write a song at home and feel it to be really good," explains Clifford, "but it's playing for the people that counts . . . the public performance is everything. Making music on city streets is like flying time. You have to put in a lot of hours before you get anywhere."

And putting in the hours can be pure pleasure when instruments and energy are perfectly attuned and the weather is right.

One day in June the Grand Parade became the street stage for a sometimes bluegrass/sometimes gospel combo called the Cooter Family. (There was some debate between the four musicians whether they were the Cooter Family or the Cooder Family but that was left unresolved after a broken guitar string was replaced and the rock-a-billy music resumed.) Derrick Daniels, alias Scooter Cooter, plays a mean washboard and an amazing Jew's harp. He explained the conspicuous absence of cash receptacles. "We're just gettin' our legs now. We've been practising but," he added in a lower tone, "mostly back in the hills."

The Cooter Family, although aloof about the origins of their band and their personal backgrounds, could cause stiff competition for other Halifax buskers. The atmosphere they create is a carnival experience and it is hard to discern whether the audience or the bluegrass buskers themselves are having the most fun.

Playing music and having fun on hot summer afternoons is certainly the happy side of busking.

Mark Welner is a familiar figure outside the Seahorse Tavern on Argyle Street. He is one of the few that knows how cold can cramp the fingers when working up and down the frets of a guitar. Welner has established his territory and built a repertoire of over 85 original songs by playing year-round on the streets.

"Making money, especially in the winter, is a gamble; just a chance. It's when I've got people stopping, standing around and listening, shivering in minus 15 degrees and still making requests for one of my songs that it really feels good." Welner considers busking a business. He keeps regular hours — 7:30 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. — and on the weekends, the best times, he takes in about \$50 an evening.



Busking: a foot-tapping flavor

"I'm ready musically for something else," says Welner who has been working the streets in Halifax for the past five years. "But while I'm waiting I continue to compose and entertain on the street. It's good practice and it keeps me in shape."

There is the rare story of a busker striking it rich. Andrew Kirk, a banjo player who busks on the street opposite Welner, tells the story of a rejected gentleman who tossed a diamond engagement ring into his banjo case one evening, but, more often than not, buskers live on an accumulation of quarters and dimes.

Up until a few months ago Barb Young was an average stay-at-home housewife. She now plays guitar and sings outside the Clyde Street liquor store. Her attitude towards busking sums up well the general feeling of street musicians. "It's a way to get outside, meet people and make a little bit of money," she says, "but it's also a lot more than that. If you love to make music, busking is an opportunity to share that with other people . . . music makes people happy."

The money isn't always great and the weather doesn't always comply, but buskers in downtown Halifax are dedicated to bringing new music and new vitality to busy city streets. **C**



# Single mothers' grim search for a place to call home

*For single mothers, Halifax-Dartmouth's 0.4 per cent apartment vacancy rate is no abstract figure. For many, it means a series of emergency housing shelters — if they're lucky. When will the provincial government address the problem?*

by Ken Burke

**L**ike most mothers, May Spinney spends much of her time watching her children, and as all parents do, she sees reflections of herself in them. But lately, she is seeing a reflection of something she would rather not — the pain of a rootless existence.

"I have two children, with the boy in school," she explains. "He's had to move into four different schools in his first year. He can't make friends and adjust because we're always moving to a new place." Spinney and her children are always on the move because they have no place they can call home. After leaving a shattered marriage, she has been shuffled through a series of emergency housing shelters because she can't find anything affordable on a social assistance budget. Like a growing number of single mothers in Halifax and Dartmouth, she has found herself in the middle of a housing shortage of crisis proportions.

A dramatic decline in apartment construction activity and a recent trend toward conversion of rental units to expensive condominiums has left people who depend on low-income housing — notably single mothers — in a squeeze. A four to five per cent apartment vacancy rate is considered reasonable. In Halifax in April it was less than half of one per cent. The waiting lists for family public housing in both Halifax and Dartmouth have hundreds of names. About half those names were of single mothers — people whose income averaged only \$12,575 as of the 1981 census, or about \$10,000 less than the incomes of single fathers.

"I've run out of ways to say how serious the problem is," says Elaine



Elaine Bishop (left) at Collins House: "We need permanent housing, not stopgaps"

Bishop, director of the Women's Emergency Housing Coalition. "Things have gotten progressively worse since 1982, and we were talking about a crisis then with a vacancy rate of two per cent. You say 'crisis' for so long that people just accept it as the norm."

Through her work at Collins House, a temporary shelter for women who are homeless for reasons other than family violence, Bishop has seen the situation go from bleak to worse. As the market tightened last year, the average length of stay at Collins House increased sevenfold to 86 nights in December from 12 a year earlier. The house was over capacity so often that 807 women and children were unable to find even one night's shelter in the months from June to December. By April this year, a further 397 people had been turned away.

"The situation for children is really dramatic," says Bishop. Besides lacking a stable home, these children must cope with less attention from a parent preoccupied with finding a place to live and a job to pay for it. "It's harder for those 12 and over because they see the hurt their mom's going through." Many also share the fear May Spinney's six-year old son feels — that of being apprehended by Children's Aid and adopted out to strangers. This threat hangs closely over some of these women and adds to the already heavy toll stress takes on them. Sometimes they can find help. "Twice we have taken a woman into Collins House to get her children out of temporary care," says Bishop. Other times no help can be found.

Faced with this housing crisis, some single mothers are grouping together to fight for affordable housing. Under the name Mothers United for Metro Shelter (MUMS), they are lobbying both the provincial government for more public housing and the general

public for support. To get their message across, they've written letters, organized marches, and used street theatre — for example, in delivering a mock eviction notice to Province House MLAs. Even so, the best lobbying tool they have is their simplest one — their own personal experience.

Heather Schneider, a MUMS co-founder, began organizing what became the group last fall when she realized how the system was stacked against her. At the time, she was staying at Bryony House, an emergency shelter for battered wives. "I didn't have a choice," she says plainly. "I had to leave or be killed — it was as simple as that." As she began looking, it soon became apparent that her four children and low income were a source of discrimination from landlords. She was only able to find an apartment after taking two of her children outside the area for someone else to look after. "I had to break up my own family in order to find a place to stay," she says.

Besides rules against children, some landlords have set minimum salary requirements for applications, or instituted \$25 "application fees", which effectively weed out those on welfare, says MUMS member Eileen Cook. Single mothers come last on a list of acceptable tenants, says Cook. "They seem to think you can't run a household unless you're a couple. Because you're on some form of social assistance, they think you're a welfare bum."

Patrick Sims, Executive Director of the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia (IPONS) admits discrimination against single parents and other low-income groups exists, but feels that it is inevitable in the current market. "Landlords are normal business guys and they gravitate towards the person who would most likely be able to pay. After all, renting is a form of credit.



Property-owners are in it for business — not as a social service,” he says, “just as Sobeys and Tip Top Tailors are in business for profit.”

IPONS has been trying for several years to have rent controls in the province removed. They say this would alleviate the housing crisis as no other strategy would. Sims says higher rents would give more developers incentive to build, and a system of subsidized government rent supplements would allow single mothers and other low-income groups to afford the units. “The likelihood of any developer building for low-income families without any kind of financial incentive is low — it’s absolutely uneconomic,”

Sims says. “The onus for helping these people falls on government, not on private enterprise.”

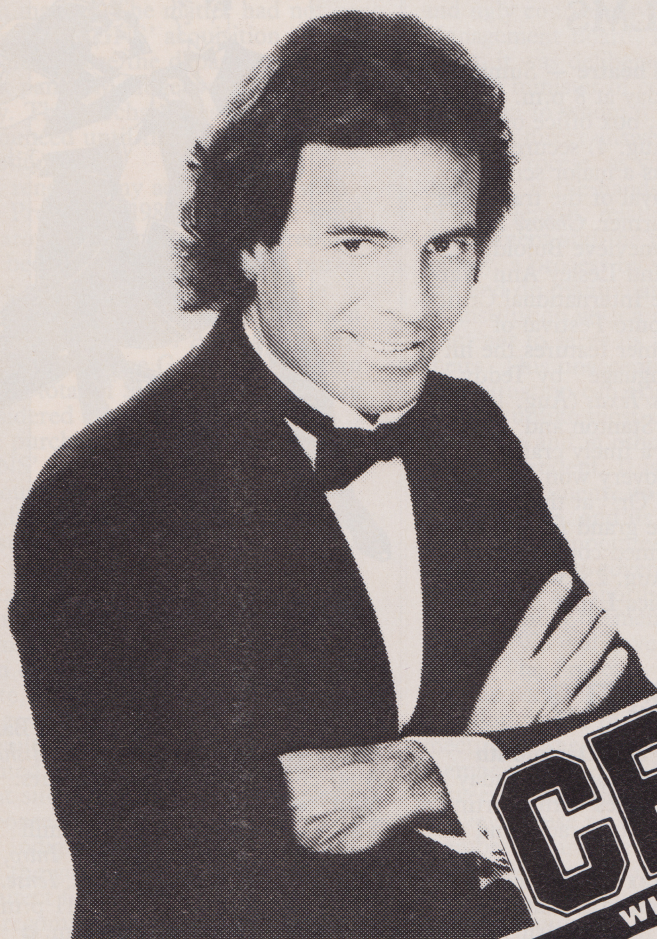
But many low-income people see rent controls as the only thing keeping rents from going completely out of their range. People like Heather Schneider fear that a removal of rent control would not mean subsidized rent cheques, but swift eviction notices. “MUMS wants rent control to stay,” she says. Instead, she advocated construction of more family public housing units by the province, pointing to a \$1.5 million facelift of Province House as a sign the money for construction is there.

Public housing is constructed by

the province and turned over to the local municipalities to run after completion. The federal government puts up 75 per cent of the funds. Despite a considerable amount of construction of public housing for senior citizens recently, only 14 new family units have been built in Halifax since the late 1970s. The provincial Department of Housing did not respond to numerous requests for interviews.

Elaine Bishop is tired of the stalling. “We’ve gone from housing crisis to housing crisis in Halifax for years, and it’s time we started on solutions. Emergency housing doesn’t help the homeless problem. What we need is permanent housing, not stopgaps.” ©

# WHAT DO THESE ARTISTS HAVE IN COMMON ?



JULIO IGLESIAS  
ALABAMA

WILLIE NELSON

NANA MOUSKORI

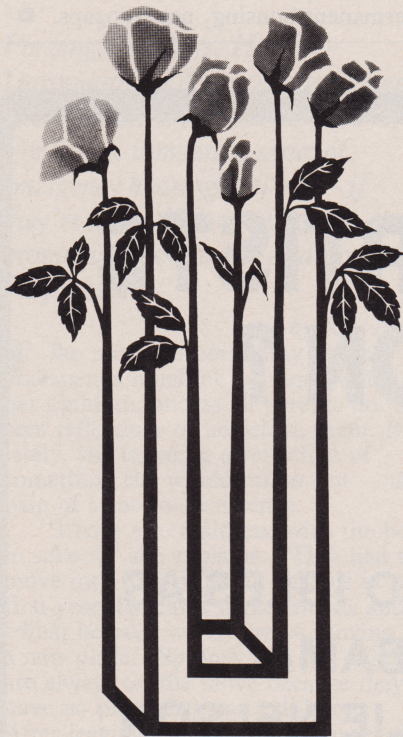
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Halifax

# GADABOUT

## ART GALLERIES & MUSEUMS

**Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.** Aug. 1-Sept. 15. *The Dynamics of Tony Tascona: Works on Aluminum.*

**Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery.** Aug. 22-Sept. 15. Downstairs: *Paintings*, Cathie Falk, Vancouver. Upstairs: *Doric Column*, Betty Shatford, Halifax.

**Anna Leonowens Gallery** (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) Aug. 6-17, Gallery I, David Askevold, a display of image and sound track from a video. Gallery II, Alex Livingston, paintings. Aug. 6-10, Gallery III, Kathleen Hodgson, *The Art Garden*, paintings and objects. Aug. 13-17, Gallery III, Alison Hahn, textile design.

## FILMS

**Dalhousie Film Theatre — Summer Series**, every Sunday at 8 p.m. in the Cohn Auditorium; box office opens at 7 p.m. *Frances* (Aug. 4) secures Jessica Lange's position as a major screen actress in her portrayal of the tragic 30s legend Frances Farmer. *Choose Me* (Aug. 11) with Genevieve Bujold, Keith Carradine and Lesley Ann Warren, winner of the International Critics Award at the Toronto Festival of Festivals last summer features the hit album "Love Language" by Teddy Pendergrass. *Paris/Texas* (Aug. 18) with Harry Dean Stanton and Nastassia Kinski, a finely crafted drama of self-discovery won the coveted "Palme d'Or" at the Cannes Film Festival. The grand finale of the series is the acclaimed comedy smash of 1982, *Tootsie* (Aug. 25) with Dustin Hoffman and Jessica Lange.

## EVENTS

Aug. 5 — **Halifax and Dartmouth Natal Day Celebrations**, a birthday party for the twin cities with sporting events, variety shows, parades and fireworks.

Aug. 8-10 — **Halifax Citadel Festival of History**, celebrates the National Parks Centennial; military drills,

demonstrations, period food, and Victorian sale.

Aug. 9 and 23 — **Halifax Citadel Cavalier Dinners**. Four course feasts in honor of Queen Victoria in the company of members of the Citadel regiments, 8 p.m.

Aug. 16-18 — **Nova Scotia Designer Craftsmen Summer Market** at the Dalhousie University campus will feature quality crafts, exhibitions, food and entertainment.

Aug. 17-19 — **Flower Show**: a grand display of flowers and vegetables featuring varieties grown in Nova Scotia, at the Sculpture Court, Dalhousie Arts Centre.

Aug. 21 — **Art Auction** of more than 100 works in support of the Third World Medical Assistance Project in cooperation with Manuge Galleries.



## CLUB DATES

**Teddy's**, piano bar at the Delta Barrington Hotel. Aug. 5-24: *Kim Bishop*, Aug. 26-31: *Alan Fawcett*. Hours: Mon.-Sat., 9 a.m.-1 a.m.

**The Village Gate**, 534 Windmill Road, Dartmouth. Aug. 1-3: *Intro*, Aug. 8-11: *Rox*, Aug. 22-24: *Tense*. Hours: Mon.-Wed. 10 a.m.-11 p.m.; Thurs.-Sat. 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. **C**

**CITYSTYLE**





# Buying a painting, Tory style

I cannot" said the chairman "allow any questions about the process." With that, he closed the meeting. And I turned my mind to The Process.

I first encountered The Process in 1979, soon after the Progressive Conservatives took office. Word got around that there was a large new painting in an office at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Painted by one of Canada's Group of Seven, Arthur Lismer, who worked in Halifax in the early years of the century, its subject, an English landscape, was of no particular relevance to the province's art collection. It had been bought with funds provided by the provincial Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness from the Manuge Galleries for \$42,500, a record then for a provincial art purchase, and nearly three times the painting's estimated value on the open market. The matter had not gone before the AGNS' acquisition committee, nor before the department's art bank panel. Manuge was a prominent Tory. The purchase was not publicly announced until the press asked questions.

I renewed my acquaintance with The Process in 1982. This time word got around that government pressure had been put on the AGNS to purchase a set of four oil paintings — views of Halifax, mainly of historical interest, dated 1769. Again they were from the Manuge Galleries and again — at a total of \$180,000 — they were considered above the market value. The purchase swallowed most of the AGNS' annual acquisition budget, although the department — which usually cries broke — popped in an extra subsidy. We — the public — were also invited to contribute.

In 1984, The Process showed up again, as perky as ever. The rented premises from which the AGNS has been operating are ludicrously inadequate, and after years of equivocation, the government announced that plans to build the gallery its own long-awaited home on a promised waterfront site could go ahead. The pleased response to the news turned into impatient indignation with the statement that the government had selected an architect for the job and, contrary to the recommendations of the Royal Ar-

chitectural Institute of Canada, would not permit an open competition for the design. (In any event, the design also turned out to be a raspberry, although the gallery's directors pronounced themselves delighted with it.)

The Process was at work again early this year when the AGNS tried to fill the position of education officer. Although several well-qualified people applied for it, pressure came from government that someone without the minimum specified qualifications be given the job. Quite properly — and indeed courageously — Bernard Riordon, the gallery's curator, balked. In revenge the department of culture froze the position, choking off an important area of the gallery's public responsibilities. When NDP leader Alexa McDonough asked a question in the legislature about this "unfortunate and ugly controversy," the chairman of Management Board, Ron Russell, to whom it was deliberately addressed, and the minister of culture, Billy Joe MacLean to whom it was deflected, evaded a direct answer.

The Process, as you will have deduced, is the hands-on, as opposed to arms-length, relationship between government and the provincial art gallery, a process by which politicians can and do manipulate the activities of an institution with a non-political function, not to serve its interests but theirs. This unacceptable and indefensible situation can arise because the AGNS, unlike most similar institutions both here and in other provinces, is not independent. It is part of a government department, its employees are civil servants, and its board members government appointees. An amendment to the act governing the AGNS will permit a minority of the board to be nominated by members of the Gallery. We will have to see whether it affects The Process.

The occasion on which I asked my question was at the annual general meeting of the AGNS in May. The members (\$10 to join) are of course powerless, and this was manifest in the mickey mouse proceedings. The members heard reports of the gallery's various activities, following which the chairman — an oil company PR man, with no reputation in the art field —

would lead the small gathering in a hand-clap. Nothing was said nor asked about the recent public controversy over the art education officer.

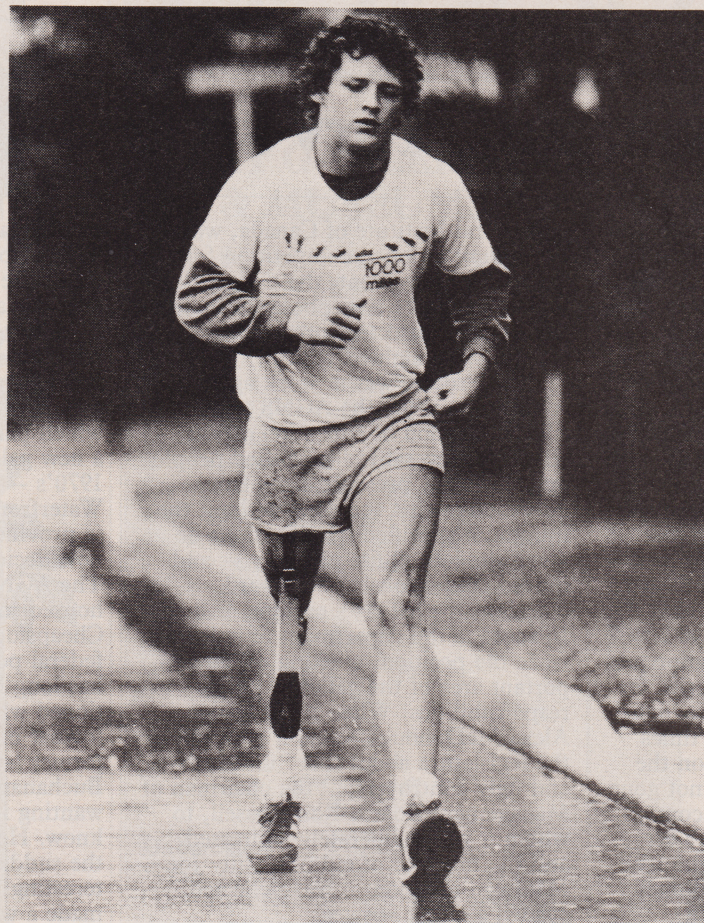
A few weeks before the general meeting, Billy Joe MacLean had announced at a press conference that the promised waterfront site — upon which plans and feasibility studies for a new gallery had been based since the 1970's — was no longer available: the Waterfront Development Corporation (a provincial crown corporation) had now decided on a commercial sale. The AGNS, he said, would instead be housed in the heritage building on Cheapside which was the city's first federal post office. The old building has long been available. When questioned whether it was Ralph Medjuck (owner of Centennial Properties and a former law partner of Premier Buchanan) who was the developer wanting it, he replied that he did not know. He could give no explanation of the sudden turnaround, but interestingly enough, an application was made a week before by Centennial to erect an office building on the site.

Also at the press conference it accidentally emerged that Marilyn MacDonald, the chairman of the AGNS building committee was on the board of the WDC — a paid political appointment. Four days before the press conference, at the AGNS board meeting at which its non-executive members and the gallery's curator were notified of the changed plans, MacDonald had moved a resolution that they "enthusiastically" accept the government's proposal. It was passed unanimously.

My question at the general meeting was about the relationship between MacDonald as a member of the site-owning board and MacDonald as a member of the site-disowned board. You know what the chairman said about The Process, but I'll add what was said by Robert Dietz — an unequivocating outspoken Jeremiah who owns a commercial art gallery in the city. "If the board had any guts, they would have resigned!" There was no response. So who's surprised? ☐

*Heather Laskey is a Halifax freelance journalist.*





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